

THINKING ABOUT AMERICA

By Everett C. Ladd

Americans have been bombarded in recent years with accounts of their nation's decline. The most persistent of these recitations involves the supposed withering of US economic prowess, especially before the challenge from Behemoth Japan. Relatedly, America has often been depicted as "deindustrializing," tumbling toward a low-pay "McJobs" economy.

But the decline is seen to extend well beyond the arena of foreign competition. Despite massive expenditures on them, our schools, we are told, are failing to educate students properly, and our youth are falling behind their better-trained peers in other lands. In other accounts, moral and ethical standards are eroding. Instead of accepting individual responsibility, we are developing the mentality of "a nation of victims." Families are falling apart. The US is described as polarized racially, and as increasingly fractured economically between haves and have-nots.

I don't propose to examine the rights and wrongs of all these diverse "end of the American era" arguments. In general terms, though, my own assessment reduces to three broad propositions: (1) The United States has many pressing problems; (2) the United States has many impressive strengths and enjoys an exceptionally fortunate position in the family of nations; and (3) many of our more perplexing deficiencies come as the flip or downside of national strengths. With regard to the latter proposition, it was Tocqueville's judgment in the 1830s that America's far-reaching individualism did much to define the society's most distinctive positive features, and at the same time carried with it blind spots and excesses. This seems still to be so.

What I will explore further is the matter of what impact all the negative commentary may be having on Americans' perceptions of their nation, its promise, and its place in the world. In doing so

I draw on two large collections of survey information which we have compiled and present in separate installments in this issue: twelve pages of data on "Democracies' Discontents," found in the Public Opinion Report (POR) section; and ten pages of data assessing American values, national self-perceptions and feelings, and tastes, which follow this essay.

Dissatisfactions

It's evident that a great many Americans have offered negative assessments of many aspects of national performance on a pretty regular basis over the last 20 years. What's not clear is what to make of it.

One complicating factor involves polling itself. So few of the specific questions, or even the types of questions, examining optimism/pessimism and the like today extend back more than a quarter century. Even when a question does have a longer line its earlier askings were typically highly infrequent. There are, for example, a few confidence in institutions (Congress, executive branch, Supreme Court, business, religion, et al.) questions from the 1960s and earlier, but only a few askings, and from times and contexts that might have made the way they were answered highly atypical.

If we did have batteries of "how are we doing as a society?" questions for 1936-1950 comparable in design and frequency of asking to what's available for the last 15 years, would the present mix of responses appear more pessimistic than that for the past? We simply can't say on the basis of existing data.

Worrying about Important Values

There is survey evidence that Americans have long been anxious about the status of things that are important to them. For example, when the Roper Organiza-

tion asked in the fall of 1948 whether "you expect the next few years are going to bring better times, worse times, or do you think we'll go along about as we are now?," nearly twice as many respondents said "worse" as said "better." (POR, p. 94.) In July of 1963, before John F. Kennedy's assassination, when Camelot supposedly still reigned in the national psychology, just 34% of those polled by Gallup pronounced themselves "satisfied . . . with the honesty and standards of behavior of people in the country today," while 59% said they were dissatisfied.

This seems natural enough. There's probably always been an element of nostalgia in the American soul. Our past has been pretty fortunate, after all. What's more, some things—including important things—are always going wrong "today," and these are the things, not yesterday's problems, that we have to worry about.

Many leaders in the United States's founding generation believed in the idea of "American exceptionalism"—that the country had a unique place and promise, conferred by God and/or special historical circumstances. This was for them, the historical record shows, a source of satisfaction but also a great burden. "What if we fail to achieve the promise?," many of the founders, including Washington and Adams, asked. This worry carried over into subsequent generations. John Quincy Adams, in his famous Jubilee Address of April 30, 1839, on the fiftieth anniversary of Washington's inauguration, expressed deep pessimism about the country's future. As the younger Adams saw it, the nation's response to slavery and sectionalism struck at the core of the promise. Similarly, Lincoln saw the half century leading up to the Civil War as a time when the nation betrayed its creed. In different forms, this anxiety can be seen recurring to our own day.

New Elements

These caveats noted, available data do seem to suggest an extraordinary burst of negative sentiments in the contemporary public. Assessments of the national economy are a case in point. Every week since late 1985, ABC News and *Money* magazine have been asking national samples a series of economic questions, including: "Would you describe the state of the nation's economy these days as excellent, good, not so good, or poor?" Subtracting the two negative assessments (not so good and poor) from the two positive ones, we get a score that in theory can run from +100—everyone finding the economy in good shape—to -100.

Charting the weekly scores (POR, p. 96), we see that they follow actual economic performance only very roughly. Scores were, for example, far lower during the 1991 recession than during the much stronger economy of 1988. But economic assessments averaged considerably lower during 1992, when the economy was actually strengthening, than during 1991, when it reached its recession low. The negative verdicts on Bush's economic stewardship handed down from various benches throughout the election campaign clearly had an impact.

What's really striking, though, is that in the 377 askings of this question on national economic performance, from December 1985 through June 1993, there isn't a single instance when more people called the economy good to excellent, than labeled it not-so-good to poor. On one occasion, in April 1986, 50% of the responses were positive, 50% negative, for a score of 0. In every other instance the composite score has been negative—in boom times as well as during recession.

This indicates that the "America in decline" accounts have had some impact—in areas of assessment where personal experience can be only a limited guide and citizens must rely on the pictures of remote, complex developments that are transmitted to them.

Personal vs. National

ABC News and *Money* magazine have also asked about "your own personal finances." In every case, the composite of the latter judgments has been more positive than the assessments of national performance—and typically by large margins. In early June of this year, for example, when the national performance score was -70, the personal finance score was -2. And in late December 1985, when the national stood at -20, the personal was +18. The personal scores have been on the positive side a substantial majority of the time since 1985 while, as noted, the national scores never have been positive.

The experience with this particular question isn't unusual. We typically find much more optimistic judgments when people are asked to assess performance in areas where they have personal knowledge or contact—local schools compared to those nationally, race relations in the community compared to those around the country, the environment where one lives vs. that elsewhere. People are persistently more pessimistic when they judge things they can know about only through external accounts (see the POR of July/August 1992, especially pp. 92-93). And this pattern, where "I'm OK but the country isn't," appears regularly in other western democracies as well. (POR of this issue, p. 92.)

We find that the high levels of dissatisfaction that Americans express about aspects of social and political performance nationally are echoed all across the advanced industrial world. In Japan, whose economic achievements have often been held up as a model, surveys done by Chuo Chosa-sha for Jiji Press on an ongoing basis since 1981, have found professed dissatisfaction with the national economy similar to what we've seen here in the US. In 143 askings since 1981 for a judgment on "general economic conditions" in Japan, more respondents have come down on the "getting worse" side than on "getting better" all but 21 times.

One might hypothesize that there are certain broad similarities in communications structures in all or most "post-industrial" societies which make large doses of negative coverage a constant in the experience of their citizenries.

A Distinctive Mix of Values

In their thinking about America, many citizens these days evince considerable concern and dissatisfaction. In part, surely, this is because today as always there's plenty to be concerned about. The debate on what else is happening can't be resolved here. Some see developments in American institutions and/or values that portend national decline and an end to the conditions which long led many Americans to consider their nation exceptional. Others of us, however, think that the froth and turbulence which dominate the way public life is now depicted and transmitted to the citizenry, while contributing to a more skeptical if not cynical national voice, to worry if not pessimism about the country's prospects, cut only so deep. In this view, a large structure of national self-images, expectations, norms, and values remains in place, largely undisturbed.

Survey research findings provide considerable evidence, for example, for the claim that a distinctive American ideology persists today, on much the same lines as it first took shape in the 18th century. And the key element, now as then, is a notably far-reaching, pervasive, demanding individualism. [For further development of the argument and supporting data, see my paper, *The American Ideology: An Exploration of the Origins, Meaning, and Role of "American Values,"* presented at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research conference on The New Global Popular Culture, March 1992.] Surveys done in the US and many European countries since the mid 1980s by the International Social Survey Project (ISSP), and the big round of polling done cross-nationally in 1990 and 1991 by Princeton Survey Research Associates for the Times Mirror Company, are especially useful in permitting

us to locate contemporary American social and political values in a comparative context.

The 1992 module of the ongoing ISSP project shows how strong and distinctive America's individualistic commitments still are. Asked, for example, to assess the relative importance for getting ahead in life of various conditions and characteristics, Americans gave clear primacy to three: one's own ambition, one's own hard work, and one's own education (see below). It's what I do—not my family background, race, religion, gender, or other factor extraneous to personal effort and commitment. Thus, the US public, across group lines, continues to affirm its belief in the ideal of a meritocratic society, and its judgment that for all its shortcomings

this country approaches the meritocratic ideal.

Similarly, Americans remain far more inclined than their counterparts in many other advanced industrial democracies to emphasize individual responsibility over governmental action in diverse areas, from social welfare programs to income distribution. Commenting on earlier ISSP research, University of Chicago social scientist Tom W. Smith aptly described the US as "the reluctant bride of the welfare state, instituting national programs later than most countries...and spending a lower share of its national income on social welfare than most...." [Tom W. Smith, "The Polls: The Welfare State in Cross-National Perspective," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Fall 1987, p. 406.]

Data also show that the US public believes that the opportunity to advance remains present in this society, and in part as a result that it supports a version of the ideal of equality which stresses opportunity over result. American individualism has deep roots in religious belief—the equal worth of each person before God—and surveys show the US continuing to stand out among post-industrial societies in the strength of religious commitments. Data presented on pp. 24-25 indicate, further, that Americans still see their country in exceptionalist terms, back strongly the ideal of "one people" united by shared ideals, and are extraordinarily conservative or preservative about the symbols and rituals which express their nationality.

Defining American Values: It's the Individual

Question: Please show for each of these how important you think it is for getting ahead in life...

Essential/very important		Not very/not at all important	
	Percent		Percent
Ambition	90	The part of the country a person comes from	76
Hard work	88	A person's religion	70
Having a good education yourself	87	A person's political beliefs	62
Natural ability	52	A person's race	58
Knowing the right people	43	Being born a man or a woman	56
Having well-educated parents	41	Having political connections	50
Coming from a wealthy family	18	Coming from a wealthy family	49
Having political connections	18	Having well-educated parents	17
Being born a man or a woman	17	Knowing the right people	14
A person's race	15	Natural ability	5
A person's religion	15	Having a good education yourself	1
A person's political beliefs	11	Ambition	1
The part of the country a person comes from	6	Hard work	1

Source: International Social Survey Program (ISSP) survey by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), February-April 1992.